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WorkFirst celebrates six years; Study shows today's welfare families leaving rolls despite lower employment

OLYMPIA – Washington families have continued to leave welfare at a rate consistent with that achieved when the economy was stronger, a new report shows. However, fewer are working.

Washington's WorkFirst program, which celebrates its sixth anniversary on Aug. 1, announced the latest findings in a comprehensive study by university researchers and the state to determine how thousands of families are faring under welfare reform.

Researchers tracked employment and receipt of welfare benefits for three sample groups of adults selected from the welfare rolls in March 1999, October 2000 and October 2001.

They found that those in the 2000 and 2001 groups were less likely to be employed than those selected from the 1999 rolls.

Marieka Klawitter, associate professor of public affairs at the University of Washington and head of the study analysis team, said those results aren't unexpected, considering economic conditions.

"Washington's unemployment rate has increased from less than 5 percent when the 1999 cohort was selected to higher than 7 percent," Klawitter said. "WorkFirst families, like other job seekers, are competing in a tighter job market."

Study results show that one year after each group was on cash assistance, half of the 1999 group was working, but only 45 percent of the 2001 group had jobs. About 45 percent of each group were employed in the last quarter of 2002, the last time studied.

"It's more surprising that the recent groups have continued to leave the welfare rolls at roughly the same rate as the 1999 cohort," Klawitter said.

(more)

For each group in the study, about half the families were no longer receiving cash assistance at the one-year mark. Rates continued to drop during the time they were monitored. Fewer than 20 percent of families in the 1999 group received cash assistance four years later and only 4 percent had continuously stayed on assistance.

Klawitter said the fact that families are still leaving welfare at the same rate doesn't necessarily clash with results showing that fewer are employed.

She said a significant number of WorkFirst participants tend to cycle on and off the rolls and change jobs. More than half of study participants in the 2001 group said that a new job or higher pay was the reason they left welfare, Klawitter said, so it's likely that some of those not employed at the time surveyed were working earlier or that they got other jobs later.

Other frequently mentioned reasons participants gave for leaving welfare included receiving additional income from a relative or household member, child support, additional pay or work hours. Smaller percentages of participants said they wanted to save their cash assistance eligibility or that they were tired of WorkFirst requirements or had other concerns about the program.

Ken Miller, Gov. Gary Locke's policy adviser on welfare reform, said that Washington has done well at keeping its welfare caseload from rising compared to other states. The latest figures from the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services show that Washington's caseload declined 5.9 percent from December 2001 to June 2002. During the same period, caseloads rose in 16 other states and 21 states had drops of less than 5 percent.

Other research shows that the number of Washington state families leaving cash assistance rose sharply from March through June 2003, while entries to WorkFirst have declined.

"WorkFirst has continued to put people to work, even as Washington's unemployment rate has lingered among the nation's worst," Miller said. "As we enter our seventh year, it's important to continue to look at ways to prevent families from returning to assistance, because even in a tough economy, work always pays better than welfare."

Findings are from a five-year survey that is a collaborative effort of the University of Washington, Washington State University and the state's WorkFirst partners: Department of Social and Health Services, Employment Security Department, State Board for Community and Technical Colleges, and Department of Community, Trade and Economic Development.

Study reports and additional information about WorkFirst are available on the WorkFirst Web site at www.workfirst.wa.gov.